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'Show Your Tongue Coating or Nothingness'

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'Show Your Tongue Coating or Nothingness'

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Editor's Note Calls For Pluralism in Literature
40050481a Beijing RENMIN WENXUE [PEOPLE'S LITERATURE] in Chinese No 1-2, Jan-Feb 87 pp 4-5

[Editor's note: "Setting Literature Free in an Age of Reform"; this Editor's Note by the Editorial Committee of RENMIN WENXUE appeared in the issue in which Ma Jian's novel "Show Your Tongue Coating or Nothingness" was published; Minister of Culture Wang Meng is on the Editorial Committee; the editor-in-chief is Liu Xinwu.—FBIS]

[Text] China is racing ahead like a two-wheeled carriage. One wheel is reform, the other is the opening to the outside world. Taking off from this two-wheeled carriage in the new era, literature has developed a pair of strong and vigorous wings. The wheel of time has entered 1987. Chinese literature should flap its wings more freely and more vigorously, heading for the new glorious horizon. This magazine will do everything it can to enable the wings of literature to flap more freely still.

At the dawn of the new year, we are publishing this January/February combined issue. Literature too must reform. This suggests that some writers will remain interested in and enthusiastic about the great reform movement across the vast land of China which affects the destiny not only of the Chinese people, but of all mankind, and will continue to present the largest audience in the world with the masterpieces of these writers that flow straight from the heart, works that are close to reality and comment on current events. It also means a furthering of the trend toward literary pluralization and wider social acceptance of works that are mostly concerned with aesthetic appeal and may loosely be described as the vanguard literature of a small circle. Vanguard literature may be elaborate, painstaking works, or it may mean works thrown together casually. They are far removed from politics, economics, society, and the majority of readers. This magazine has long expressed its desire for intensive reform to diversify its format to accommodate all schools of thought. Through this combined issue, however, we also want to tell everybody frankly and vividly that we are most delighted to devote full space to serious and mature works which contemplate the existence and development of a people in relation to the existence and development of the self, which show the courage to examine destiny and the self as well as to analyze society and other people, and which assiduously seek a new beautiful form while earnestly becoming more attractive to readers.

After literature becomes pluralistic, there still remains the problem of eradicating feudal cultural despotism. Attempts by the gang of four to dominate literature and art by dictating a particular mold have been condemned and dismissed as a laughingstock by an enraged people, but everybody in the literary profession should immunize himself against the virus of despotism. You may cling to what you admire, continuously alter what you follow, and engage in a fair debate with people espousing

what you dislike or disapprove of. But you must not act intolerantly toward those with different ideas, like the person who could not stand another individual sleeping soundly nearby. Amid pluralization, we should adhere to the principle that everybody is "equal before literature." Accordingly, this magazine reiterates that as a publication put out by the Chinese Writers' Association, we serve all writers, middle-aged and young, amateurs as well as professionals, novices as well as masters. We provide an open forum for all kinds of works of all styles and all schools of thought and give exposure to most of the ideas that have emerged through pluralization. Only division of labor and a dearth of space prevent us from publishing a small number of literary forms such as popular literary works and novels. As for writings representative of the "small circle," if they are voluntarily made available to us to demonstrate what a dazzling treasure-trove Chinese literature has become, we will naturally be willing to publish them. But we need hardly explain in detail why we cannot become the social platform of a particular small circle, or a number of such circles.

To realize the above goals, we have carefully put together a full lineup. Both Mo Yan's [5459 6056] mid-length novel and Luo Dacheng's [5012 6671 2052] reportage touch upon the depression adolescents experience during the transition to young adulthood. This is a rather sensitive issue which society as a whole is most concerned about at the moment. Mo Yan looks at the problem from a uniquely literary perspective and employs a literary language. His is a decidedly psychological analysis. Luo Dacheng, on the other hand, draws upon reality for his material and perfects it. A deeply troubled conscience pervades his piece and gives readers a different aesthetic feeling. Thirty-three years ago, Lu Ling [6424 5044] shook the literary world with the publication of "First Snow" and "The Battle in the Low-Lying Sand" in this magazine. Many trials and tribulations later, he has now staged a comeback with a new short work. In this issue we want to solemnly draw the readers' attention to the painstaking and highly individualistic works of Yang Zhengguang [2799 3630 0342], Ye Shuming [0673 2562 2494] and Ma Jian [7456 1696], all born just a little over 30 years ago. This issue also carries the reportage "A Wanted Circular in the Year of the Tiger" which brings us to the forefront of economic reform and is an appeal on behalf of reformers in the midst of their difficult journey; a beautiful thoughtful sonnet by Liu Zhangqiu [0491 3277 4428]; a collection of interesting children's literary works, and moving, thought-provoking essays.

Literature too must open to the outside world; the call for "going to the world" is rising by the day. This magazine has consistently been an important window through which the outside world can catch a glimpse of the development of Chinese literature. However, we feel strongly that we must cure the disease of ignorance, blindness, and the eagerness for instant success and

profits surrounding this matter. We are a literary magazine that publishes works with Chinese as their language of creation. Thus it should be oriented toward the Chinese-speaking world first and foremost. In other words, it should first gear itself to China and do its best to satisfy the aesthetic needs of Chinese readers at all levels. Only when this is accomplished can it present the non-Chinese speaking world with works representative of Chinese literature. To directly produce for and supply the non-Chinese audience with Chinese works strikes us as ridiculous. Certainly we would be amazed to see the similarities common to all humankind and the irreconcilable differences between them and us. All this we will learn in the great confrontation between Chinese and Western cultures, including literature. It is with this idea in mind that we increase the space devoted to literary criticism, beginning with this issue. The conversation between the writers Ye Junjian [0673 0689 0256] and Gao Xingjian [7559 5887 0256], both well versed in Western European literature; a pungent analysis of Zhang Xinxin's [1728 6580 2946] creative mind; a study on the entry of literary editors in the West into literary creation; and the inauguration of the column "Literary Round Table"—all this may help us "march on the world" even more steadily.

Let our literature, already aloft, flap its mature wings ever more freely and vigorously!

12581

Show Your Tongue Coating or Nothingness
40050481b Beijing RENMIN WENXUE [PEOPLE'S LITERATURE] in Chinese No 1-2, Jan-Feb 87
pp 98-116

[Novel by Ma Jian [7456 1696]: "Show Your Tongue Coating or Nothingness"]

[Text]

Basket of Woman

The car struggled up the 5,000-meter Gangbala Mountain. Below a few Jiefang trucks were still limping along laboriously. The last few clouds at the mountain top floated toward the ravine, brushing past the rugged rocks. Yangzhuoyong Lake came into view, mirroring the blue sky above and the snow-capped, sun-bathed mountain tops in the distance. You cannot help but want to embrace them. This is Panshan Highway, which leads to the interior of Xizang.

After living in Lhasa for a month, I had visited all the ancient temples and monasteries, particularly Dachao Monastery, the Buddhist shrine of the Zang nationality. Endless pilgrims from all over chanted scriptures as they circled the monastery, praying to be born to rich families and therefore free from suffering in their next lives. Like practicing professional athletes, the crowds in front of the monastery lay prostrate for long periods, kowtowing,

then get up, put their palms together, and lay down again. Tourists had their curiosity satisfied. Particularly appealing to people from outside are Xizang's burial ceremonies. Camera-toting, I went to the sky burial platform several times, only to come back in a huff: either the ceremony was over before daybreak or I was turned away from afar. Sometimes they even throw stones at you from above to make you go away. It is said that the body must be kept at home for 3 days before being carried by family members to the sky burial platform. They must keep going without turning back. When they get to the entrance of the village or the road intersection, a red pottery jar must be smashed to symbolize that the spirit of the deceased would not return. There will be sky buriers to burn joss sticks. If the family is rich, it will also hire lamas to recite scriptures to introduce the good deeds of the deceased to the after world, where he will either be reincarnated or stay forever. Sky buriers must remove all the flesh from the corpse and cut it into small pieces. Bones are broken down into a paste with an iron hammer. If the deceased is a young person with immature bones, some barley flour would be sprinkled on the bone paste which will then be mixed and fed to vultures. Should the deceased be a believer, an auspicious sign would be drawn on his chest with a knife. The burial ceremony ends with the handing-over of the scalp to family members. The latter then say farewell to the dead before going to a temple to burn incense and pray to Buddha.

Desperate to see a sky burial, I decided to try my luck in isolated areas in the interior of Xizang. The car reached the foot of the mountain and began racing along Yangzhuoyong Lake. I felt dizzy and opened the car window. The surface of the lake was as flat as glass. Outside a fresh wind was blowing; there was not a speck of dust. Inside, the car was hopelessly crowded and the wave upon wave of sheepskin odor was suffocating. I could not take it any more and got off.

It was August, the golden season on the plateau. The sky was so blue and transparent that you did not feel the presence of air. I walked toward the lake, put down my travel bag, took out a towel, and gave my face a good wash. This was Langkazi, a small village inhabited by over 100 households. The Zang people have built row upon row of mud houses at the foot of the hills, with streamers flying at rooftops. Half way up the hill stood a tiny lama temple, its walls painted in white and red, with a wide blue stripe under the eaves. Nearby were several broken walls with no rooftop. Also adjacent to it gleaming in the sun was a pagoda which had just had a new coat of plaster.

This was a beautiful place. Not an iota of trash could be found by the lake. The pebbles were clearly visible in the water. Sunlight penetrated through the water to reach the bottom of the lake. Atop the roofs, red, white, blue, and yellow streamers danced in the wind, evocative of the magnificent land that was the kingdom of Buddha. Near the lake beneath the sea of mud houses stood a cement

red-tile structure. Probably the village office. I took out the phony letter of introduction stamped with a red seal and approached it, only to find that it did not look like a village office after all, just an ordinary one-story house. A soldier came out. He spoke with a Sichuan accent. He invited me to go inside, so I followed him into the house. This was a telephone military station. He was stationed here to maintain and repair this stretch of telephone lines. Ordinarily the lines worked smoothly and he was free to go fishing at the lake and perhaps to read magazines and swordplay fiction. He was pleased that I asked to stay at his place. After living here for 4 years, he had learned a good deal of the Zang language and often dropped in on villagers' homes to drink. A submachine gun hung on the wall. It was a mess inside the house, much like a garbage dump.

I asked whether there was a sky burial platform in the area. He said yes. I then inquired whether there had been sky burials recently. He started, then told me a woman happened to pass away a few days earlier. I got excited and wanted to question him further, but he became evasive and mumbled something about going out to buy liquor. I offered him some money. He awkwardly brushed it aside and walked out. All kinds of thoughts raced through my mind. If I missed out this time, it would be difficult to find another opportunity. How could it so happen that someone died just when I got there? I absolutely must not let this opportunity slip by.

In the evening we drank and talked about news in other parts of the country. To get on good terms with him, I started bragging in a rambling way. He liked fishing, so I said I also liked fishing and assured him that I would send him an imported stainless-steel fishing rod when I got back to Beijing. I also wrote down my address right away, claiming that Zhao Ziyang and Wang Guangmei [3769 0342 5019] were my neighbors. Needless to say, you would never be able to find that address. Later I started talking about women with him. He listened with intense interest, smoking nonstop. An expert when it comes to women, I proceeded to give an exaggerated description of the modern liberated woman and even told him in Sichuanese that I would let him sleep with my wife when he got to Beijing, adding expansively that he should not stand on ceremony. He touched the table-top and suddenly said to me, "The woman was only 17." I was shocked. So young! "She died from massive bleeding during childbirth," he said. "The baby was still inside." I felt a wave of nausea and took out a cigarette. We fell silent for awhile. The floor was very damp. A single bed stood against the wall, a yellow wooden military bed with five red stars and the unit number painted on top. The walls were covered with numerous magazine and newspaper clippings. Under the washstand behind the door was a pile of iron stands, electric wires and ropes. The lower half of the window was covered with newspapers. The sky, visible through the upper part of the window, had turned from dark blue to black. The highway was quiet, the last car having passed a long time ago.

The soldier stood up and, slouching against the bed, said to me, "You can see it. Most of the folks here have never seen a camera. Certainly not Mima's two husbands. They have no idea what a camera is."

"Who had two husbands?" I asked. "The person who died." "Why two husbands?" I asked again. "She married two brothers," he said softly. I sat there blank for a moment, then asked, "Why must she marry two husbands?" As soon as I opened my mouth, I realized that was a dumb question. She was dead already, so what was the point of asking why she married two husbands? But he replied, "She was not a local. Came from Naidui-laqian. There were 11 children in her family. Mima was the weakest. Sold for 9 pieces of sheepskin when she barely turned 6."

"Do they still sell people in this day and age?" He did not answer me, but continued, "When she grew up, though, she turned out quite differently. She even went to school in Longmazi for 3 years. Her stepmother was still living at the time."

"What was her stepmother's name?" I thought this was a story worth writing and took out my pen and diary.

Her stepfather was a drunkard. As soon as he got drunk, he would burst into song and grab women. Sometimes he would grab Mima and fondle her all over. He got worse after his wife died. How could a teenage girl push away a husky man like him? The soldier's voice was agitated and restless. I knew he was going to pour out a torrent of curses. Even when I was bragging earlier, he kept swearing incoherently.

"Damn! Let me take off my military uniform first." His face changed from red to purple, revealing an obstinacy typical of Sichuan men. I kept quiet, waiting for his swearing to end.

He walked toward the door and took a look at the wind direction; the telephone line was totally motionless. I finished the liquor and paced around the room several times. There were no mosquitoes in this place in summer. The humidity from the lake seeped indoors and had a chilling effect.

"Could you take me there to have a look?" I asked.

Without looking up, he picked up the keys and flashlight from the table and said, "Let's go."

We entered the village and made our way through a narrow alley between rows of dark mud houses. It was a bad bumpy lane. Animal dung, dry and wet, and weeds shrivelled silently in the glare of the flashlight. Dogs were barking all around us. He pushed open the railings and shouted in the Zang language toward a lighted house. We went inside the house.

Several men seated near a fire turned to look at me, mouths agape. One of them, a little older than the rest, stood up. The soldier spoke to him in the Zang language. The others stared at me. I took out a cigarette lighter and passed around cigarettes. Only their teeth were visible in the dark. I struck the lighter again, letting the flame flare up. They relaxed their jaws. I handed the lighter to the man who had stood up. He took it and sat down. By now they were all concentrating their attention on the lighter, which was being passed around for inspection, now and then looking up to give me a smile. I sat down. A young man next to me took out a piece of dried mutton from a bag and cut out a slice for me. I have eaten raw beef and mutton several times in the Yangbajing pastoral area, so I unfastened the knife from around my waist and helped myself to the meat, slicing it as I went along. They were very pleased and handed me a bowl of highland barley wine, which had not had enough time to ferment properly; pieces of barley were still floating on top. I thought of the woman.

The house was so permeated with the smell of cow dung cakes and smoke that one could hardly breathe. I glanced around it: like the homes of other Zang people, it was simply appointed. Cushions covered a wooden cabinet that protruded from the wall for more than one foot. The walls were covered with a coat of limewash. To the right of the door was an inner room, probably Mima's chamber or a storeroom for odds and ends. There were no door curtains, but it was pitch dark inside and one could not see anything. Directly above the fire was an ancient Zang cabinet. A Buddha drawing was pasted on the cabinet next to the wall. It featured a demon regarded as the messenger of death with a large round samsara in his hand. He opened his mouth wide to intimidate the living. Below this very ancient picture were pasted extracts from Buddha scriptures in the Zang language, all printed on red or green paper.

They had perhaps been told of my interest in seeing a sky burial. Some of the men turned to look at me and nodded. The soldier stood up and told me to do likewise. He led me to a spot behind the door and shone his flashlight on a tied gunnysack sitting on sun-dried mud bricks.

"That's her," he said.

I flashed my light on the gunnysack a couple of times. She was probably sitting, facing the back door. She hung her head very low; perhaps they had to press it down when they tied up the sack.

My eyes remained wide open as I lay in bed thinking about the woman's looks. She must have been a good singer, a characteristic of an ethnic minority. I, for one, have often heard them stop to sing among the trees and on the road in the mountains. You may not make out what they are singing, but it is soothing enough just to hear that full, open female voice. They would also remove their fur-lined jackets and tied them around

their waists, their hair slipping past their ears as they bend down to work. Again I borrowed the face of the woman I saw on the car: round-faced, red-cheeked, with a small nose, jet-black eyes, and a way of looking at people intently. Her skin was fair and delicate on her neck and shoulders. Her breasts strained against her blouse. From the side you could see the cleavage between her breasts as they jiggled when the car bumped along.

The soldier came back from checking the lines and turned on the light. Expressionless, he lighted a cigarette and lay down beside me. Neither of us was sleepy at all.

He finally opened his mouth, "Ok, let me tell you. After all, you are not a local and will be gone in a couple of days. Besides, I don't feel good if I cannot get it out." Using a pillow as a backrest, I sat up to listen to his story. This is what he told me.

Mima and I were very good friends, which was why I have not been transferred. This is no place where one can stay long. I first met her on the mountain. I had to climb two mountains to get to where I wanted to change the telephone lines. She let her sheep graze and sat there blankly. As I came down the mountains, I was carrying a large bundle of old lines, very heavy. I said hello and sat down next to her. Her dog took a look at me and went back to sleep. It was a very hot afternoon. The sheep had all found breezy spots to graze. She smiled a smile, then kept her eyes on me as if I were not a man. I told her I came from the telephone station below. She did not understand. So I followed the telephone lines with my hand and pointed to the house down there. She smiled again and turned around to look at the peak of Gangbala Mountain. A truck was laboring to climb the slope but we could not hear it. Mima told me she had seen me before and asked why I had stayed here so long and not gone home. She spoke with an accent unlike that of the locals. That day I cut out a large piece of telephone line and offered it to her, saying she could use it as a clothesline or for bundling things. From then on I often went up to the mountains to see her. She too often waited for me on purpose and offered me the dried mutton and highland barley wine that she made. She could also make wine using dates and wild mountain pears. I would frequently stay with her till dark. She was cleaner than most Zang girls. Actually I found the mutton and cheese smells on her rather pleasant. Once I unfastened the strap on her leather jacket, but she did not push me away, and we held each other. She was the first woman I touched. As soon as I got close to her or when my hand touched her neck, I had a feeling she was waiting for me to put my hand inside. But I was too naive. She also told me her father often touched her private parts. Several times she ran out of the house, too frightened to go inside. All the villagers knew that her father slept with her and the young men looked down on her. At about this time last year, she suddenly burst into my house and groped her way onto my bed. I do not know what gave me the nerve, but I had sex with her there and then and we continued all night long. Before daybreak the next

morning, she pushed me away, saying she had to go home. I helped her put on her clothes and fell asleep. Before she left, Mima stuffed under my pillow the turquoise necklace that she had worn since she was small. Only the next day did I know she had married the two brothers.

As he finished speaking, he gave me a look, his head tilted to one side, and said, "If you tell this to anybody, I will definitely be finished. They would kill me." I nodded solemnly to indicate that my lips were sealed. This is the reason why he is only referred to as the soldier in this novel.

The soldier took out the necklace from a drawer. I got closer to the light to take a look. It was an agate necklace, with padouk beads as spacers and a large turquoise as pendant. The turquoise was smooth and shiny and gave out a milky smell much like a girl's. I thought of her in the gunnysack on the sun-dried mud bricks.

"Did she come look you up later?" I asked.

"No, she worked at home after she got married. I heard that both Lao Da and Lao Er were very fond of her. Once they got drunk, you could hear her crying out late at night. Somebody even saw Lao Er and her do that thing on horseback as they returned from a visit to a Buddhist temple in Wangdan. Mima was already pregnant at the time. These two brothers married this woman at a ripe old age."

"Why did she not look you up again?" I again asked.

"She did," the soldier said. "I do not want to tell you everything."

The sun had already risen in the east when I climbed up to the sky burial platform. Unlike its counterpart in Lhasa which was on a level piece of huge protruding rock, this platform was located halfway up the mountain on a mound of rugged rocks. Several iron drill rods were deeply buried in the ground, with pieces of rope tied around them above. Nearby were a few rusted knives, a large hammer, and a axe with a broken handle. Strewn all over the platform were unbroken pieces of bones, hair belonging to the deceased, smashed bracelets, glass beads, and fingernails extracted by the vultures. Silence reigned in the mountains, where the vultures remained perched on the peaks. Fog began forming above Yangzhuoyong Lake. Softly it rose to cover the surface of the lake. It got thicker and thicker, rising and falling like a woman's breath. Soon the fog filled the air and enveloped the blood red sun. Without making a sound, the pocket of fine mist over the lake began making its way slowly toward the foot of the mountain. They emerged from the fog. Lao Da was carrying the gunnysack; maybe they could not afford a sky burier or maybe there was none in the area. Lao Er was carrying a bag, a thermos,

and a flat-bottomed pan. Bringing up the rear was a lama. It took me a while to make out that he was one of the people drinking in Mima's house the night before. The fog rose behind them.

They gave me a smile and untied the gunnysack. Her limbs were tied in front of her chest, like a new-born infant. An "x" was drawn on her back with a knife. The flesh where the cut was made had begun to dry and shrivel. She tumbled out as soon as the rope was loosened. They immobilized her head and straightened her limbs. She was now lying face upward, her eyes looking at the sky and the clouds of scattering fog. Lao Er quickly lighted a pile of incense and sprinkled a pinch of roasted qingke barley flour on it. The incense presently sent forth a thick smoke which soon mixed with the fog. Another fire was lighted for the flat-bottomed pan. Lao Er melted some butter in the pan. Lao Da added several dung cakes to the three fires and looked up at the mortar top. Much earlier the lama had sat himself down, cross-legged, on a piece of sheepskin near the fire. He opened his book of scriptures to read, his hands fingering a rosary.

First I looked from afar, then slowly walked near. Her four limbs were spread out heavenward, as if there was something else she wanted to do. Her breasts, fairer and smoother than the rest of her body, drooped down her shoulders blades. Inside her bulging belly was the unborn child. Maybe the soldier's, I thought.

I set the aperture on the camera, adjusted the distance, and backgrounded down to her right to take some pictures. In the background, the fog was curling its way upward and the snow-capped mountains far away had just been given a layer of warm color by the sun. From the camera lens she looked like a little girl. I thought of the time when she was taken here on horseback as a little girl. Then too she was stark naked as she put her head out of the sheepskin bag to look at the high mountains and lake here. Later, as she tended her sheep, she must also have gazed at the snow-capped peaks in silence and thought of her hometown. In the lens she seemed to have fallen asleep. I focused my camera lower. Her arms were limp, her palms turned upward, and there was a red mole below her breasts. She had smooth thighs. I suddenly thought of the soldier's rickety bed and the two drinking brothers. I focused my camera on her feet. The five toes grew closely to one another. The little toe was very short and had not grown a nail yet. I stepped back, adjusted the frame, and snapped the shutter. It was stuck. I checked the camera, snapped the shutter again, but still it did not work. I got desperate and hurriedly set the shutter at automatic exposure. I adjusted the lens again and snapped the shutter gently. Still the shutter was stuck. My legs felt like jelly, so I sat down, retrieved the roll of film from the camera, put in new batteries, focused the lens on Mima's face, and tried to snap the shutter one more time. It was frozen. Then I suddenly caught a trace of a twitch at the corner of her mouth, not a smile, not a jeer, but it did move alright.

I slowly stood up. A shrill piercing cry sounded overhead, followed by a gust of wind. A vulture swept down and circled over the corpse before landing on a piece of rock, folding its wings.

I rejoined the three people over there. Lao Er dragged the bag closer and removed a dung cake which he then threw into the fire. Next he took out a piece of roasted qingke barley flour cake and broke off a piece for me. I began eating hungrily. To my surprise, there were a few raisins in the cake. He then took out a piece of dried mutton and poured some barley wine into the thermos lid. I gulped the wine down in one mouthful. The dried mutton was probably made by Mima. I looked upon at her. Her genitals were directly facing us. A cotton string, probably used to pull the infant out, was visible outside her bloody upturned vagina. I cut up the mutton furiously with my knife. The brothers gave me a smile. I seemingly smiled too, but I was actually facing the snowy mountain tops far away, now bathed in the red glow of the sun. The fog had disappeared without a trace. In the distance the lake was as placid and clear as the day before, and as deep as Mima's turquoise.

Lao Da stood up to add dung cakes to the three fires and pour wine for the lama, who refused any more. He told him Mima's spirit had already been sent to heaven. Lao Er also got up and took out a sharp knife from the bag that he had carried up the mountain on his back. I followed them and walked over. By this time the vultures were flying and circling noisily in the air, so many that they blocked out the sky. The brothers turned Mima over, thrust the knife into a round spot in her buttocks, and worked the knife down the thigh all the way to the ankle. Lao Er took the flesh and cut it into small pieces. Soon her entire leg was reduced to bones. Because her abdomen touched the ground, a sticky fluid flowed out between her legs. I took up my camera and set the distance. Click! The shutter snapped.

Soon the ground was covered with vultures. As the dozens of vultures squeaked and fought with one another in their mad scramble for food, a group of crows landed on the side. None of them dared come close, probably out of an inferiority complex. They watched and sniffed from afar, waiting.

The sky burial platform was now flooded in sunlight. Lao Er kept trying to shoo away the encroaching vultures, throwing them a stream of things from Mima's body. I picked up a rusty knife, took a hand that had been chopped off, cut it between two fingers, and then threw the thumb at the pack of vultures. Lao Er gave me a smile, took the hand, and put it on a piece of rock. He hit the remaining four fingers flat with a large hammer and then tossed them over. I suddenly saw the light: that way you got rid of the bones as well.

By the time Lao Da lifted Mima's face from the chin upward, I had forgotten what she looked like, except that her eyes were distinctly facing the sky until she entirely disappeared on the platform.

Finally Lao Er grabbed Mima's braid, still tied together with a piece of red yarn, drove back the vultures around him, and staggered back to the fire. By then the crows had joined the vultures and were pecking at the brain, scraps of flesh, and other remains around the iron rods.

I looked at my watch. It had been 2 hours since I came up. Time to go back. The soldier was waiting for me. He told me he had borrowed a boat and would come with me on a fishing trip to the lake today.

The Smile of Duomula Lake

He slowly dismounted. This was the same place he had ridden through just then.

He took a deep breath, then exhaled softly. The air smelled of only rouzi grass and baked damp earth. The wind had not changed its direction: it was still blowing from Gangdesi Mountain Range and was making its way casually across the wilderness before petering out far away. It was Duomula Lake over there. From a distance the wind-lashed water in the lake seemed to be hiding some panting prehistoric dinosaurs. All around reeds were swaying in the wind, and where the water was shallow, there were even some white jian flowers. This was a salt-water lake where yaks and horses disappeared each year. He knew his family would not move here.

He took a few steps forward, then turned back. He threw the reins onto the horseback and walked toward the hill. Continuous erosion by rain and melted snow had carved a crisscross of gullies and ridges where the expanding limestone underground had ruptured through the grassy slope. Horses often tripped and fell and injured themselves here. Small livestock too frequently fell into one of the deep holes and drowned. He climbed up the slope. Below, pools of stagnant water reflected the blue sky. He looked back at the horse. The animal was totally still. He had been riding it for almost 1 month, a sturdy horse from Uncle Gesang Suoque. He was not comfortable riding it; his thighs and tailbone ached, maybe because he had not been on horseback for a long time. He grew up in this area after his family moved here. He thought of his youngest sister Gaga who was killed in the grassy ravine after falling off a yak she was riding. He was then 11 years old.

He turned around and kept walking. The grassland slowly opened before him. The farthest he could see was a stretch of flat land, with grass trembling and pale in the sun. No clouds, no tents, no herds of livestock. He felt an emptiness in his chest.

This prairie sat on a plateau 5,000 meters above sea level. A few extremely hardy highland cold-weather crops were thriving in the August sun. He kicked away several lycopodium *clanata*, sat down, and turned around again to look at the horse. The animal was moving his hoofs back and forth, his tail swishing away the horseflies, his belly twitching continuously. The wind

has stopped, he thought. It was a trotting horse, with a makeshift saddle. A few days earlier he lost the sack which had served as a cushion under the saddle. With the wooden saddle directly pressing on its back, the horse suffered cuts in several spots. Oftentimes the pain was so excruciating that it would break into a wild frenzied gallop. He recalled the brown running horse he used to ride. It could clear any grassy ravine, no matter how deep. And then there was the white yak. After going to Saga to attend school, he had not even ridden a yak. As the holidays dwindled one by one, he got more and more anxious. Five days earlier he ran into the Zhaxiba family. They still recognized him. The aging Zhaxiba could hardly stand up. Old Zhaxiba asked him what kind of incantations he had learned in Saga. There were more than a dozen members in the Zhaxiba family, living in several tents pitched here and there. At night, they all crowded into one tent to listen to his stories about the outside world. Hearing none of this, old Zhaxiba simply went on to tell people what happened when he went to Saga to study incantations when he was young. As a lama, Aku had his eyes and lips removed and hands chopped off by a living Buddha Danba Duoji as a sacrifice to Nanwu Goddess of Mercy. Barely a few days after he came home, he died. So his father sent him off to study incantations to avenge Aku's death. He set off with a herd of yaks. He said his master was called Duncuo Jieyun who knew all kinds of powerful incantations that could call forth rain and hail. He handed over all the yaks, a silver pillar with Buddha's name on it, and a copper incense burner and remained at the master's place for 1 year. His master taught him incantations to conquer evil and a few ordinary curses. Upon his return, he first laid a curse on Danba Duoji to make him blind. Then he went back home and came here to live. Gongbu, a member of the Zhaxiba family, told him that his family had moved from here to the southeast a month earlier. It was said that there was a nice piece of low-lying land over there, but it would take a dozen days to get there. Gongbu also said that his younger sister, Dawa Maji, had blossomed out like a wild berry, irresistible to anyone who saw her. Gongbu's words so agitated him that he felt very uneasy. Zhaxibu Gongbu said he did not understand why his family moved there, except that it had a nice fall season. The place was not windy in summer. The ravine opened to the north. As long as the air was still, bumblebees and poisonous mosquitoes in the low-lying area would descend on and attack the livestock. When the livestock smelled the dampness in the air, they would follow it all the way to Duomula Lake. Zhaxiba Gongbu said his father was so sick that he could barely brandish a wuduo. His mother once fell off a yak and could not work either. Actually Gongbu is not right about this, he thought. The woman never rode yaks to begin with. This mistake probably arose from a mistaken report of the accident in which Gaga died after falling from a yak.

A gust of wind was blowing from Duomula Lake. He sniffed; there was a bitterness in the otherwise bland air. It was getting dark. His legs felt heavy and numb. He

gave them a stretch and got up, staggering. He had not eaten for 2 days and his stomach felt uncomfortable.

The horse was gone. Not sure when. He remembered that he fell asleep just when the wind changed direction. He told himself he should have led it up here. There was no grass here, but there were no horseflies either. Thinking, he went down the slope, following the footprints left by the horse on the grass. It was tough on his legs. Later, as night fell, he stopped and stood still. He opened his mouth and then quickly closed it. The grassland had suddenly gotten cold. But he could still make out which direction Duomula Lake lay. He could not go there. It was said that it was formed of the urine of Shiren Fairy and the mountain top near the lake still bore traces of the erosion caused by her urine. Such thoughts notwithstanding, he still headed for the lake. He had written a letter home saying he would be coming back during the holiday. As it turned out, he himself opened the letter 4 months later at the Mayoumu village government office. Villagers told him his family had left for Yare with their flock of livestock as early as early spring. When he rushed to Yare, he heard conflicting stories from several herdsmen. He finally decided to look for them in the direction pointed out by Uncle Gesang Suoque. He looked here and there and the day before found himself searching near the low hills. Uncle Zhaxiba always warned him not to go to Duomula Lake, saying that Fairy Shiren and the God of Mountains rendezvoused there and that whoever witnessed their copulation would go blind. The evening before he almost caught up with his family, who had just taken down the bed curtain erected on the slope. The freshly-turned soil was still moist, while the spot under the rock where they had set up the flat-bottomed pan was dry. He also found a piece of fabric used as a saddle pad. It had needlework on it and was apparently sewn by his mother. He recalled Dawa Maji's dress. She has grown up, he thought. Actually she was quite mature when he left. No longer would she undress in front of him. Also, she would go a good distance from him to urinate.

He thought of her sour-milk smell. Then he turned around and said to the black horse, "Look! They were here! Her woolen blanket was spread out here." He lay on the ground, sniffing and turning over the sheep hock which had probably been removed from the pan. He looked up and said to himself, "I have been looking for you for almost a month now. Why are you still sitting? Get up! Get up! I have bought you shoes, made in Beijing! Listen, there are so many people in Beijing. All the livestock in Mayoumu would not fill the large school building. Big windows everywhere! Also a staircase that moves!" He suddenly stopped and looked around him. Not a breath of wind on the prairie. The smell of yak dung and mutton bones penetrated his nose. He saw a group of dung beetles working their way through some cow dung as it slowly expanded and softened.

Now he was standing in a dark wilderness, indifferent to the attack by biting mosquitoes. He walked forward and saw pale-purple ripples on the surface of the lake. It was

here that the fairy urinated. He lay down, looking into the distance. Only in winter did the fairy leave here to stay with the God of Mountains. This was her urine. White circles on the lake. That was how she urinated.

He fell asleep and woke up again. He looked red in the dazzling sunlight. He wanted to seize the dream he dreamed just now. Then he became more clear-headed. All of a sudden he sat up and tried to make out the direction in which he came, realizing that without food, water, or horse, he could get out alive only if he would be lucky enough to run into a herdsman. He was feeble from hunger; no sooner had he stood up unsteadily than he felt dizzy, his temple and heart beating wildly. The black horse should have found its way here the day before. This was a low-lying road, with a ditch to the left, too wide for the horse to jump over. To escape the hordes of attacking flies, the horse must go windward, which could only have meant here the day before. He looked at the lake. It was still and calm. Along the edge was a piece of white caustic soda resembling a hada. Nearby the puddles, pale as ice, were shining brightly in the sun. In the higher part of the marshlands was a large expanse of rouzi grass. No flies here. He stretched his legs, slowly walked toward the lake, and circled it on its right side as if he would find something if only he followed the water. That day, though, he found nothing apart from a grassy slope burned by caustic soda. He tried drinking the water but spit it out immediately. There was a painful burning sensation in his stomach. "Even urine tastes better," he mumbled to himself. Later he looked up and saw the water smile a smile, like Dawa Maji.

He finally stopped walking at dusk. Gongdesi Mountain was enveloped in steam. Its highest peak was bathed in the evening sun, which became smaller as it moved away from the mountain peak and stopped briefly at the sky. Night fell.

Then he felt a blast of wind. He saw his home—a tent he spotted after the wind rose. A flickering fire. The same old pan, with a lid made of zinc iron sheet. Behind the steam was his mother putting some butter in the pan. He smelled the fragrance of buttered tea and fried milk remains. Then he saw his sister. No, it was she who saw him. She screamed, ran forward, and touched him on the shoulder with her head. He smiled and went inside the tent. Nothing had changed. On the floor were the same old pieces of yak hide and Dawa Maji's blanket. As usual, his father was slouched against the wooden pillar in the middle, closest to the fire. The butter bag, which his mother had used for a lifetime, was still hanging from the pillar. He placed near his father the white plastic bucket he had brought with him, telling them that the black horse had run away. At this point, Dawa Maji started playing the dawanari. His kid sister had not grown a bit, still the same old giggly girl. She would giggle even if he were to daub her face with charcoal. Dawa Maji lowered her head to look at the fire, broke up a tea brick, and threw one piece into it. He handed her the table salt he had brought back. She had grown up: when

she bent down to take the salt, her breasts brushed past the floor and jiggled a little. He thought of the school playground where he would go to play ball after dinner. Adjacent to the playground was a large pond. Since the school building was right next to the pond, one could see the white walls reflected in the water, clean as a whistle.

He opened his backpack. Hasn't the black horse run away? he thought. First he took out the blouse (neatly wrapped in transparent paper) he had bought for his mother. His two sisters screamed, circled the bag, and began rummaging through it. So he said, "Wash your hands first." Father was also looking inside. He had been drinking heavily. As Uncle Gongbu had said, he was very weak, lying there like an old xuedong, and even spilled on his hand some of the highland barley wine in the wooden bowl.

His back felt very chilly, so he drew closer to the fire. It might be summer, but the cold night air made his legs feel numb and very uncomfortable. He could also hear the sheep goring one another with their horns out there in their crowded quarters. Inside the tent, cow dung smoke and hot air hung heavy around him. He drank several mouthfuls of the buttered tea, tasting it carefully. The milk was fresh but the brick tea had not been brewed well and actually tasted a little stale. He wanted to talk. He said to them, "Go ahead, ask me questions," then added, "Have you seen the building I lived in? Multi-story. There are people living on every level." Then he thought of the cinemas and said, "Everything here is movie stuff." Noting that they did not understand, he said, "Films can be divided into feature films and documentaries. There are also foreign films." He realized that all he said had left them unmoved, so he said, "It is a much bigger world out there, although there are no snowy mountains as tall as these, of course." On and on he went. Later he thought of his school and the fact that he was a weirdo in the eyes of his classmates, someone who actually lived in a wasteland 5,000 meters above sea level. Upset by school life, he too often thought of the tent where the smell of dung smoke and sour milk was pervasive and the empty plateau that had no beginning and no end. Here, as long as you had gunpowder, guns, horses, and dogs, kiangs and Mongolian gazelles were yours to take. Here you could eat and sleep in total freedom. At one point he felt born between the city and the plateau. Civilized living was very tempting to him: on the car that took him back, he could already hear the cry of a body and spirit that were torn asunder. Now half of his body was home. Now he was sitting at home deep in the heart of the wilderness beside Duomula Lake, listening to the rustling wind and telling his family trivia like the reproduction of sheep and yaks. Whiffs of mature fragrance floated from Dawa Maji's body. He stood up and circled the room once. He went over to touch the marks left when he made the knife handle, the mirror encased in the cabinet. He and she put their heads together, in front of the mirror, she looking at him, he looking at her, her hair tickling his neck. All that had not changed.

Don't you miss your Mayoumu? Haven't you come back? Aren't you here, looking for your family's tent? The shiny silk socks you have brought back for Dawa Maji, the blouse you have bought for your mother, the powdered orange juice that you can drink simply by mixing it with water, the scroll of Chinese scenery—Has all of that been lost along with the black horse? You have told them that the girls outside wear such and such shoes and walk in such and such a way? That you will come and take them to the place where they can work? Everything is written in the books. The stores there outnumber those in Mayoumu a hundredfold. They will never want to come back.

Dawa Maji came to offer him some tea. He watched. She said, "Undo your buttons. You are sweating. Are there many women out there?" He looked at her eyes, her lips, and said, "They do not wear Zang robes. They wear jeans, like naked cattle legs, and take them off when they go to bed. They are not like us. We sleep with our leather robes on." They did not look at each other. It turned out that once when they were sleeping together, he put his hand under her arms, over her small nipples, and between her thighs. She woke up, her legs trembling, and removed his hand. From then on she had stayed away from him.

Henceforth, the moment he saw a girl, he would think of the stretch of wasteland and the suffocating atmosphere that was part and parcel of it.

Here he was, looking dejectedly at the vast swamp of Duomula Lake as it slowly woke up. First to catch the light in the sky was the large piece of caustic soda. The black horse must have taken the pack to the tent, he thought. He walked forward. Pamupu, the shepherd dog, ran up to him, stroking his head against the crotch of his pants.

He saw Mount Gangrenpuqin moving toward him from behind the blue sky in the distance, surrounded by white clouds that looked like Fairy Shiren. He hung on for awhile before dropping onto the ground. His ball pen fell out from his jacket pocket and was trapped between several blades of rouzi grass.

Bare Bottom, Eight Teeth, Worms

When the sun started to turn red, wisps of white clouds began gathering over there, a harbinger of a sunset glow. I looked all around me: the high mountain in the east had no accumulated snow. The surrounding hills now rose, now fell, their outline barely visible. It looked as if I had to cross over a mountain. This was the western part of Qiangtang prairie and, with its numerous lakes, an ideal location for shooting prairie scenes. The only trouble was that since the area is crisscrossed by rivers, it is often hard to find one's way out. By the time I made it up a hill, the sun had sunk below the horizon. Taking advantage of the reflected light in the sky, I hurriedly scanned my surroundings. The road that I came from was now

completely dark. The prairie stretched ahead. It was a mass of unrelieved darkness without the slightest sign of smoke or light. Once again I had to sleep in the open that night. I gave up looking for any trace of human habitation. I picked an airy spot at the hilltop, sat down, and finished all the biscuits I had bought at Bange. I removed from my jacket pocket two dry milk cakes that I had stolen at the country fair. Earlier I had eaten one. It was so sour that I almost threw it away. If you let it stay in your mouth slightly longer, your mouth weakens. I dared not bite it because it was so sour, still I could taste its milky flavor, a flavor that man is used to from birth. As the night wind had not risen, I spread out my sleeping bag and climbed into it without taking my shoes off. Looking at the sky, I pondered the eternal subject: life. What I have seen in Xizang differs from things in the interior. First, the Zang people do not grieve over death. To them, death means simply exchanging one human existence for another. What is inexplicable is the phenomenon of people kowtowing for long periods outside temples and monasteries. Why are they so afraid of punishment? I felt hungry, my stomach was totally empty without a scrap of food. A stream of gas had been churning inside me all day and finally made its way down the large intestine and out through my ass.

I turned around to make my stomach feel a little better. It was getting cold. I thought of the experience of sleeping in the open. I looked up to see which way the wind was blowing. Luckily my smell was being blown westward. There was a river there. Besides, the land was flat. Even if the wolves picked up my smell, they could not come over. Before I fell asleep, I took out a dagger from my bag and tied it around my wrist, shaking with fright at the thought of a wild ox trampling me mercilessly, a wild dog hauling away my backpack, or a wolf sneaking up behind me and suddenly ferociously biting my bony neck. I also imagined fearfully that underfed in hell, these little devils would nibble on my ears, nose, hands, and feet as if I were a carrot. Later I also thought of women and imagined the warm smell inside their bras. If only I could touch a breast now, I would die without regrets.

I saw a blurred stationary light to my left, so I took out the camera and had a look with the center-focused lens. It was shaped like the ventilating window at the top of a tent. I climbed out of the sleeping bag and groped my way down the hill. It took me 2 hours to track down the tent. I made a noise, no dog jumped out, so I lifted the door curtain. An old man was sitting motionless near a fire. I said hello in the Zang language. He turned around. Maybe because he was looking at me through the fire, he could not see me clearly right away. Only when I sat down beside the fire did he realize that I was a Han person. He gave me a smile and asked me in Chinese where I came from. I told him I came from the mountains where I had gone to take pictures of the sunset and that I was at Duoba Village the day before. He said he had met photographers in the past when he was building a brass Buddha at Sela Temple. Everyday the temple was

visited by foreigners and people from other parts of the country. During those few years he learned to speak a few simple sentences in Chinese. I put down my backpack and looked around inside the tent. It was totally empty. The several pieces of rock used in setting up the fire had been burned out. Probably people often pitch tents in this area. He too got there that day or the day before that, equipped with nothing other than the few pieces of sheepskin he was sitting on, the rucksack he removed from the horse, and an aluminum basin. I asked him whether he had any food. He said no. I stretched out my hands over the fire. Behind him were some dung cakes as well as a few Chinese mugworts and short damp willow roots that he had just gathered. He pushed them forward and started chatting with me. Suffering from pangs of hunger, I responded half-heartedly. Later he stood up, tightened his belt, and walked out. I spread out my sleeping bag, pulled over one of his old sheepskins, and dozed off. In my sleep I heard a strange noise: some animal was frantically treading the ground with its hoofs outside. Nervously I went out, knife in hand. He came back, his left hand gripping the horn of a yak, his right hand covering its mouth. The yak tried to turn back with all its might. I was about to lend him a helping hand, but he quietly called me not to go over there. Then he gripped its head, whipped out a knife from his waist, and thrust it into the animal's neck, removing his hat to catch the blood. The beast struggled desperately. He let go and gave the yak a push. The animal then staggered back along the way it came. He returned with a hat full of blood and handed it to me. "Drink it," he said. He sat down again on the old sheepskin, took out a cigarette, and lighted it, at the same time licking the blood on his fingers. I put the hat of blood down and watched the hot steam and bubbles slowly disappear. Sleepy no more, I started chatting with him, waiting meanwhile for the blood to solidify gradually in the hat.

A herdsman from the area around Jiwa Township, he left home half a year ago to go to Rikaze to pray to Buddha. He sold all his yaks and sheep and donated the money to Lunba Temple. I asked him how he planned to make a living in the future. He said he wanted to go to Gangdesi Mountain to pay religious tribute to Buddha and to Mafamucuo to cleanse himself of the five poisonous creatures. He said he also had a daughter. I asked why she was not with him. Instead of answering, his eyes darted around the room searchingly. I knew he wanted to drink, so I took out a cigarette and threw it across.

After he told me the story, I suddenly thought of a woman. Yet I hesitated to tell him and never did. For one thing, I was worried he would pester me no end. Also I was afraid he would go crazy when he saw the shape his daughter was in.

This was essentially what he said (minus some trivial details I have omitted).

"I sold all my livestock and went to Zhashi Lunbu Temple to pray to Buddha to ask him to ensure that

everything is well with my daughter and help me see her in heaven after I die. I prayed to Buddha to look after me all the way through 49 reincarnations before my soul ascends to heaven."

"It is all because of the sins I have committed."

"I was breast-fed till I was 14. Even then Mother's milk kept coming. Father was killed in the year when the rebellion was suppressed. There is only a handful of stock-raising families here. That you can tell as soon as you come into the area. I slept with my mother as early as I was 16. I went to Jiwa Township every year for the Snow Festival and when they sheared fleece from the sheep, and could meet some women there. But I was very confused. In any case, I could not leave her. Sometimes she cried too, but there was nothing she could do. I was a man she had brought up since I was an infant. Since Father died, she took care of me and never socialized with the herdsmen that passed by. One year I heard in Jiwa that Sela Temple was going to build a brass Buddha, so I took this opportunity to leave mother for Lhasa. You know, my daughter was already 9 years old at the time. If she knew my mother gave birth to her, how could she go on living?"

"I learned many things outside, but nobody knew I was a sinner. Every day after work I would kowtow outside the temple to cleanse my soul. However, I had long gotten into the habit of nipple-sucking. During those years, I bit my 10 fingers till they bled and festered."

I recalled he put his finger in his mouth to suck the yak blood earlier, his eyes as greedy as those of an infant. His face was frighteningly dark. His hair, all mussed up, was tied together with a piece of red yarn. The veins beside his temple, which appeared red in the glow of the fire, stood out. As he spoke, he kept stretching out his hand, a strand of loose hair moving constantly as his head shook. I found his looks disgusting.

"Five years later, I thought I had completely atoned for my sin, so I went home. My daughter Maqiong was already 13 years old. I brought back clothes and songba shoes for her."

"At 13, Maqiong already could sew bangdian. She would sometimes put herself in my arms so that I could comb her hair like that of girls outside. Less than 2 years later, she grew up to be a mature woman, her breasts and neck identical to those of her mother. You don't know, but in the pastoral areas women as well as men bare their tops at noon."

I said I knew. "What about your mother?" I asked.

"She passed away the second year after I came back."

"As Maqiong went horse-riding with me to round up the yaks, her jiggling breasts made me palpitate with fear and anxiety. Once I could not stand it any more, so I

grabbed a ewe and sucked it with all my might. She saw me. From that day onwards, she pulled her shirt down and stayed clear of me when she slept. I started drinking heavily. I knew my old problem had come back."

"Last summer a man came. His name is Tubu. He bought leopard skin and antiques. He is well educated and can speak the Chinese language. Said he has been a work cadre in Lhasa. Actually he is son of a bitch, who will go to hell after he dies. He brought along aluminum pans, plastic wine bottles, and colored threads, things in common use in the pastoral areas."

"He fell in love with your daughter, did he not?" I interrupted him.

"He spread out his quilt next to my daughter and slept with her at night. That day I heard Maqiong's soft cries, and felt awful inside. On the other hand, I wanted to let Tubu marry her. Otherwise, I would sin again. That day I began biting my fingers again."

"Tubu stayed here more than 10 days. Maqiong cooked him roasted meat and served him wine every day. He gave her two plastic hairpins and a pair of plastic bracelets. During that period I put animals out to pasture every day so that the two of them could have the tent all to themselves. But Tubu got worse and worse. Not yet 30, already cursing women like an old man. I would have punched him but for the fact that Maqiong was fond of him."

"I got drunk the day they were about to leave. I really should not have drunk so much." He got agitated and gazed at me as he spoke. Noticing that the yak blood had solidified, I turned the hat upside down, returned it to him, cut the blood in halves with a knife, and handed one piece to him. Without looking, he took it with one hand and dug into it with his other, trembling, hand. He looked pitiable.

"Tubu got me drunk." He suddenly looked up at me.

I knew he was lying. I lowered my head to look at the yak blood in my hand. The side that had been sliced caught the glow of the fire. I thought I saw a flash on his face cast by the reflected light on my knife.

"Tubu probably was drunk too. At the beginning, I asked him to take good care of my daughter; it had not been easy for me to bring her up. He also pledged to treat her well."

"Later, when she called me father, I laughed. Then I told him she was the daughter of my mother. I remember Maqiong uttered a scream and told Tubu I was talking nonsense. But Tubu was very pleased. Then I started driveling. I told Tubu to let me sleep with Maqiong at night. He agreed, but Maqiong rushed at me and hit me. Tubu said to her that if she did not sleep with her father, he would not take her with him. Maqiong was stunned."

"At the first crack of dawn, I sobered up and found myself lying on top of Maqiong. Her left nipple was bitten so hard that it had become a bloody mess. That night I took out on Mima all that had pent up inside me over the last few years. At first I still thought I might have been dreaming, so I went out to take a piss. When I was completely sober, I got back into the tent. I saw Maqiong. She used some clothes to cover her lower part. I went out. She mounted and left."

"When frost came, I took the livestock to Chala. I knew she would never call me father again, but I still wanted to find her. In Chala I asked around; many people said there was no such person in the area. Later I learned from a carriage store that a fur trader passed by the place a few months ago, together with a woman. The store owner asked me whether or not the woman wore a large turquoise on her head and had a round face with slightly swollen eyes. He also said that the merchant kept swearing at her. Judging from his accent, he seemed to have come from the Rika area. So I sold my livestock and headed for Rikaze."

"When I got there, I dared not tell people I was looking for my daughter. I looked up several people called Tubu and later met a furrier on the street who knew Tubu. However, Tubu had left town to buy goods. On a road 20 li from Rikaze, I found his house. Maqiong was not there. I then asked Tubu's mother, saying I came from Maqiong's hometown and had an oral message for her. The old lady said, 'You are looking for that slut? I kicked her out long ago. My house has no room for that kind of bitch. May Guanyin Bodhisattva send her to hell as soon as possible.'"

"Afterward I went to Zhashi Lunbu Temple and prayed for several days nonstop. People who prayed the scriptures there all said there was a woman, not yet 20, who had been raped by all the loafers in the area and was kept alive by food given to her by worshippers at the temple. Rumors had it that she came from the Jiwa pastoral area. Later her private parts smelled so bad that no man touched her any more. The older people at the temple also cursed her father emotionally. I felt terrible inside. From then on I kowtow everyday to atone for my sins and beg for mercy from Buddha to help me find my Maqiong."

He said many other things, but this was essentially the story. Now he was determined to die. He had heard that people who went to Gangdesi Mountain to be reincarnated often died in the mountains. The more you reincarnate, the higher your position will be after you ascend to heaven. To him, coming back alive had become totally meaningless. I looked up at the ventilating window at the top. The sky had begun to turn white. The yak blood in my stomach remained undigested and kept sending up a fishy smell. I found and ate several cloves of garlic and felt sleepy. He too lay down on the piece of sheepskin, the aluminum basin serving as his pillow, and silently recited the six-character scriptures. The odor from his

mouth filled the tent. I lay down and thought of the woman I had seen at Bajiao Street: round-faced, her two cheeks blown purplish red by the wind on the plateau. There was no turquoise in her hair. On the contrary, her hair looked like a heap of yak tails that had been cut off. Her hand kept pulling back the hair that had fallen over her face. When she noticed you watching her, she would suddenly look up and smile at you. If you stood there without tossing things at her, she would stick her tongue out. Her lower eyelids were slightly swollen, but when she smiled, her eyes shone with a kind of tenderness. When she smiled, her lips became red and elastic. Actually that was the smile of plateau women, honest, wretched, free from selfish desires, and as expansive as the prairie. She was constantly lost in the dust and noise of the crowded market. Only by hanging onto a beef counter did she save herself from being trampled to death by the throngs of people. Her forehead was heavily wrinkled, probably a result of continuously looking up to beg. When she found that somebody had stopped and felt sorry for her, she would lift her left breast and bend down to suck it, now and then raising her head to smile at him. Constant sucking had made the nipple round and transparent. Several dogs scurried past her to hide under the meat counters, waiting to pick up pieces of chopped meat.

Golden Pagoda

Ge'er Temple was located between Mount Qomolangma and Mount Xixiabangma, another fairy mountain. If you climb up to the temple's highest point, you can see both fairies dressed in silver and white, looking skyward as if they were yearning to return to heaven. Beside the temple was a post road that led to Nepal. This road, now fallen into disuse, used to be the only route available to merchants and caravans. Near the road was a meandering river. Highland barley and peas were grown in the surrounding flat land. A little farther from the river, the ground was covered with broken stones. Not a blade of grass could grow here. The herdsmen often drove their livestock elsewhere to graze in summer. Originally there was a brass pagoda at the temple's apex, where a piece of bone belonging to a saint Milariba was buried. Today the whole pagoda had disappeared with the exception of the stone foundation. Other richu had also collapsed long time ago. An ever-rising sea level has depopulated this area.

The Zang people here were of short stature and slow-moving. All moving objects, be they white clouds, flocks of sheep, undomesticated dogs, waving streamers, women with children on their backs, or a tramp just arrived from the interior, namely, myself, moved slowly, like slow-motion films. The most unbearable was the brain. You could actually feel your head cracking open from the temple down, and you realize what lies above is undoubtedly the crown of the head which might open wide any moment like the iron hat at the observatory. Half of my memory disappeared from my cerebrum. I forgot what my late wife looked like, even though it was

for her that I wandered around the world in pain. I also forgot all the philosophers and writers in the world. But my cerebellum remained intact: Some ancient things that I had long forgotten now came back to me. Six years ago, I lost a large bunch of keys. Now I suddenly recalled that during a dream I had put them beneath a plank under the bed that was used to raise boxes. I dreamed of a mouse frightened by the noise of keys as they fell to the floor. It then grabbed the keys and opened the drawer of my writing desk. In its disappointment, it turned everything upside down and even swallowed two tablets of my stomach medication. This made me stuff the keys under the plank.

I sat down on a street corner, gasping for breath, and was gradually surrounded by several children and dogs. Some gazed at my face and hair, others at my clothes, beard, and camera. I smiled at them in between gasps. Then I stood up and asked for the location of the township government office, the bogus letter of introduction in hand.

The clerk at the office once attended senior high school in the area, but had lost some of his mental agility. He finally finished reading the letter, after spending as much time as it takes to finish a cigarette, and gave me a leisurely smile lasting 5 minutes. I told him I had come here to climb Mount Qomolangma on a political mission for a certain newspaper publishing house. He said nobody was allowed to climb the mountain alone. A man came here too the year before, complete with a written will. A month later he returned, his face all greenish-purple from the cold and his nose and ears rotten. He was taken to the hospital where he remained under intensive care for a month. The face of Fairy Cuiyan was not for everybody to touch. He also said there was a glacier at the foot of Mount Qomolangma. If one fell into it, he would be crushed to death by the ice floes even if he survived the cold. I was quite disappointed. He told me, "You can climb the mountain here. At its peak, you can see Mount Qomolangma. It is a deserted Nepali temple. There are people living at the foothills." In the afternoon that very day he took me to the village below Ge'er Temple.

The village resembled a sheep or cattle pen from afar. Some flagstone houses stood no more than 1 meter above ground. Nobody was in sight. The soil was soft, loose, and spongy. As you walked, a cloud of dust gradually rose from under your feet and stayed motionless in the air. A dog slowly crawled out from under the palings and leisurely uttered a bark. A girl's face appeared in the hole in the ground. Then it disappeared only to re-emerge later, revealing much of her body. She was holding a mirror in her left hand and was combing her hair with her right hand, facing me. The streets were narrow and covered with dust or stones. Pointing to a house, the clerk said that he knew the family and that I could stay there if I gave him a pack of cigarettes. Holding the flagstones for support, we went into the house. We could not see anything inside apart from some

smoldering ashes, but we did hear people sitting there gasping for breath. I stayed there at night and heard the following story. A malfunctioning cerebrum and the fact that it was translated rendered the story illogical. On the other hand, it could not be fictitious because I remember some details vividly, thanks to an exceptionally alert cerebellum. The strangest thing was that it happened some 400 years ago and the narrator was relating his own experience.

I was apprenticed to Dege Sangbuzha when I was only 11 years old. At that time work had just begun on the brass pagoda at Ge'er Temple. My master, his wife, and I all lived in the temple. I heard that both Master and his wife, Kula Zhuli, were of Nepali descent, although Master was born on this side of Mount Qomolangma. His father died on the post road to Nepal. Master was a well-known gold- and silversmith. Almost every woman in the area had jewelry made by him.

Master Sangbuzha undertook to build the golden pagoda, to be made entirely of brass, with a spire to be cast in pure gold. It was during these 7 years that I picked up all my skills. Kula Zhuli was younger than Master by almost 30 years. She escaped with Master to this place, where they held their sham wedding. Master met her in Nepal and enchanted her with his beautiful jewelry. She was approaching 30, but did not have a single wrinkle on her face. On one side of her nose was set a sapphire, reminiscent of the sacred law of Mafamu Lake. Every morning she would coil her hair up, apply red powder to her hair parting, and dot a cinnabar between her eyebrows. On her body could be found the most beautiful gold and silver jewelry Master had crafted.

Seven years later the cast mold for the brass pagoda was finally completed. The pagoda looked like a giant inverted bell. The bottom layer, which measured 4 meters in diameter, would be placed on the foundation of stones laid side by side. The levels would become smaller and smaller as they went up and were shaped like a round awl. All kinds of auspicious objects were hung from the protruding eaves at each level, their mouths bearing aeolian bells. The fourth level, which was also the highest level, was much wider and almost flat-topped. According to Master, that way the bottom of the spire would not rust when it rained and the spire cast in pure gold above would not easily be stolen. Surrounding this level were 14 peacocks. The pagoda was 16 meters tall including the foundation, and was all cast at once with the exception of the top and foundation. On the walls of the pagoda were pictures inscribed by the Master which depicted the life history of Sakyamuni. The spire of the pagoda was an integral gold pagoda in itself with 16 large Buddhas in it. While the gold pagoda stood only 2 feet tall, it was a priceless treasure because of Master's exquisite and meticulous craftsmanship. It was hollow and was linked to the brass pillar projecting from the pagoda proper.

I have been strong and healthy since I was small, a hardy type. Master was very fond of me. He said the kewu inlaid by me was more sturdy and attractive than his. Kula Zhuli treated me even better; she often saved some of Master's delicious dishes for me. When I was 13, Master went to Dansangdun for a month to select casting sand. Before he left, he let me move into his inner room lest the lamas in the temple sleep with his wife. At night, Kula Zhuli asked me to sleep beside her. The next evening she stretched out her hand to touch my crotch. From then on, I shivered whenever I smelled her scent, a musk scent that she exuded from top to bottom. Later she also got hold of the temple's gegui. They waited until they thought I had fallen asleep before cuddling each other. But I was always awakened by her noises. When Master came back, I dared not tell him.

Master was then in his 50's, still pretty strong apart from a slight hunchback. His curly hair hung loose on his shoulders, his eyes sparkled, and he liked to tie a piece of purple silk around his head. He drank moderately and was given to flirting with women who came to him to have jewelry made. Often he would give away his own silver to make earrings and wuduos for women, expecting payment only later. Also he would draw them toward him and lift their dresses and robes while he helped them put on an amulet or bracelet.

I began sleeping with Kula Zhuli before the cast mold for the brass pagoda was completely dry. At that time Master often locked himself up in a room to engrave gold Buddha statues. The room was guarded by several Zhaba at night. Only Kula Zhuli and Ounie, the temple's treasurer, had access to the room. I was in complete charge of the project outside and had under me a few bricklayers and blacksmiths. That night I did not shiver and actually smiled as I watched her take off layer upon layer of her sari. Then I began mouthing her all over as if I were drunk. We became inseparable. I would look her up as soon as night fell, following the trail of her scent to her house. I could tell by the trail of her scent whether she was in the house or with Master even during the day. One day she left for Nielamu early in the morning to exchange oil and red powder. In the afternoon I smelled her coming back and, dropping the file, ran toward the back of the hill. As soon as I got to the slope I saw her. Hurriedly she lifted her sari. We were rolling back and forth on the ground when Master came up. He kicked me away, then kicked her. He picked up a wooden stick and beat her furiously.

The lady and I avoided eye contact during the next few days. We were waiting for an opportunity.

One day she suddenly burst into my room. She looked pale and her eyes were dull and lifeless. Standing in my room, she told me Master had walked out on her. He was really gone. Later the temple said a good deal of gold was missing, having been taken by Master. From then on I took charge of the whole project. The lamas were worried that I too would run away, so they sent special people to

keep an eye on me. It was then Kula Zhuli and I began living together. She looked after me in every little way and told me many things about Nepal. She wanted me to go to Nepal with her where she would marry me in a sham wedding. She missed that place and said that when she was small she often dreamed of marrying a beier tree in a real wedding. She even showed me a fruit, her real husband, which she had collected and treasured. She called it her amulet; armed with it, she was not afraid of anybody. She said that when we got to her hometown, she would have my fortunes told again. If her life and mine were mutually destructive, she would leave me. She said she and Sangbuzha, for instance, were mutually destructive. She ran away with him amid family opposition.

A dozen days later, the brass pagoda was completed. Kula Zhuli and I packed our things and were about to leave. That evening, she told me that when Sangbuzha was building the gold spire, she often went in to see and knew all the mechanisms to take the golden pagoda down. Inside the manchaluo beneath the Thousand Hand Guanyin Bodhisattva was a golden key. The mechanisms to open the door leading to the golden key were below the Buddha's warrior attendant. By reciting the secret yan-fu-ri-luo-luo-qi-cha-ken code, lifting the Buddha statue, and pressing the golden door open, one could get hold of the key. Only Ge'er Temple's kanbu knew the secret code. After a little thought, I advised her not to take the risk. If the lamas discovered us, we could forget the idea of leaving. Who knows, they might even kill us. She probably left me in the latter part of the night.

Somebody knocked on my door at early daybreak the next morning, saying Kula Zhuli could not come down from the top of the pagoda. Everybody at the temple ran toward the hilltop. So she had done it. The golden pagoda had come down, but the brass pillar inside had penetrated deep into her body through her thighs, now long, now short, its length varying as she twisted and turned. Moreover, it got thicker and thicker all the time until she was totally pinned down. The golden pagoda had fallen on the flat top of the fourth level. All the lamas were transfixed. I found a ladder but before I could go up, it caught fire as soon as it touched the pagoda. I was also driven back by the intense heat. The brass pagoda was as hot as if it were being melted in a large pot. Later the kanbu also arrived. First he had the golden pagoda lowered with poles. Then he had a scene prepared for a rite and began reciting incantations to dispel evil. Instantly it began to rain heavily. The brass pagoda became hotter even as it was enveloped in thick smoke. Raindrops fell on it, producing a frightening explosive sound. A few days later the thick smoke disappeared. Kula Zhuli stood there, dead, but still giving out that whiff of fragrance. I and all the lamas got ready to leave the temple. According to the kanbu, Duoqi Pazhuo, that place was not suited for building temples: it was the eye of the God of Sea. The temple should have been built by the river at the foot of the mountain. Yet there was no way I could leave her then. As soon as I lost her scent, I

would fall down, so I settled down in the largest room vacated by the departing lamas and kept watch over her day after day. Sometimes late at night I could hear her moaning and groaning as if she was having sex. Two years later, she gradually withered, spinning this way and that as the wind moved, much like a weathercock. When the air was still, she invariably faced in the direction of her hometown. The road was located between the fairies of Mount Qomolangma and Mount Xixiabangma. In the end her face became as white as snow, while her hair got blacker and more lustrous. One day she fell from the top of the pagoda like a piece of paper. I rolled her up carefully and came down from the mountain.

When he finished his story, he pointed at the wall at the back and said, "That's her." I stood up abruptly and, reacting to a lack of oxygen, felt a spell of dizziness. I walked over and touched her. She felt almost as hard as cowhide, but her hair was shiny and smooth. I lighted a match and, indeed, there was a round hole under the tuft of black hair on the thigh. Afterward the township clerk told me the old silversmith never allowed matches to be lighted. The next day I made it to the mountain top. As I said in the beginning, there was only a heap of rocks in the brass pagoda.

Leaving the village, I noticed that the dust was still hanging in midair. Several women, carrying stones on their backs, were slowly walking toward a slope, stopping every few steps to catch their breath and occasionally smiling at me. One of them was the woman who put her head out of the flagstone house to comb her hair. She was full-bosomed. I also noticed that the second button on her blouse was missing. A safety pin stubbornly refused to let go, loyally guarding the body of its mistress.

Baptism

The undulating mountain ranges wound and curved their way through hundreds of li. They stood naked and motionless in the sun. Only at dusk did I see the vast expanse of wasteland being injected with blood by the setting sun, vibrating like a layer of skin. But the sunset glow quickly disappeared beneath the mountain top. As the last rays lingered on the horizon, I began climbing, searching for that palpitating sense of life in these mountains. Later I was taken and cleansed by it. What remained was a filthy, empty body. Cursing, I stood up, smiled, and returned to the highway.

This was the second day after I left Kaga. At first I did not take the highway, hoping to climb these desolate mountains to find out what damned joke life was. What else could I do? I groped for one day and found myself at the end of the road. I had failed. Shamelessly I cried like a child.

It was a problem among artists, spasms of convulsions. On the plateau, religion permeates every inch of soil. Mythology and hearsay are inseparable. Some pain is

purely the result of an absence of enlightenment on the part of modern civilized man. Maybe my writing about this today should be regarded as the beginning of oblivion.

She was found 9 days after Living Buddha Danzeng Wangdui died. Born 9 days earlier, she opened her eyes wide, now and then studying the people and objects around her. The house was made of mud and grass. A butter lamp lighted her mother's nipple and the several oddments of red and green cloth above Debuje. This was a poor family. Hearing some noise outside, her mother stuffed her into the sheepskin robe. Soon the people outside blocked the door, like a pack of dark livestock. Mother stood up and let the visitors into the house. All lamas from Danba Temple, they occupied a high status and were led by Xionglaiiba.

Xionglaiiba Suolangzimo said, "I have heard that your child was born 9 days ago." Mother said yes. The surrounding lamas immediately clasped their hands and recited scriptures. Suolangzimo at once sent a messenger to report that the Living Buddha had been reincarnated here. He also asked, "Boy or girl? What's her name? Sangsang Zhuoma? Call her Sangsang Zhaxi from now on," Suolangzimo said.

An elaborate Living Buddha reincarnation ceremony was subsequently held there, after which Sangsang Zhaxi's entire family moved to Danba Temple.

By the time she was 15, Sangsang had learned the Five Books of Great Theory and was studying medicine under Manrenba. The first time she ever left Danba Temple, she walked one hour to Manrenba's zhacang [a place for study, prayer, and chanting]. In recent months she would not let anybody accompany her because she felt that left alone she would be better able to do some thinking. She had been puzzled and bothered by an indescribable feeling in the last few months. During the past 15 years she spent her time either studying characters or reciting the scriptures, apart from practicing yoga regularly. Actually half of this road, which could wake her up with a start, was very familiar to her. Outside the door of her meditation room was a small cobbled road that wound its way downhill. On either side of the road were living quarters for each of the kangcun [subdivision of a zhacang]. After turning the corner, you could see a high red wall. Inside the wall was the heart of the entire temple where Sakyamuni and the 16 major Buddhas were enshrined and worshipped. Below the red wall was a road for people who pray. An elderly person, holding a prayer wheel, had been praying for more than 2 decades. Zhaxi often ran into her. Whenever they met, the woman would lie on the ground, face downward, kowtowing nonstop. Facing the red wall was the gegui's door where a large pack of dogs could be seen chasing around and mating. If you keep going and turn right, you would see the street. This street became a sea of people during every Buddha-sunning festival. Even on ordinary days it was full of tents pitched by merchants. In between tents

and houses were crude shelters put up by stone-masons and beggars using pieces of stone. Sangsang Zhaxi often came here to buy some earrings and bracelets from Indian merchants. To go to Manrenba, one had to turn left at the intersection. It was a small path that cut through fields of pea and buckwheat. Along the path were clusters of duxing grass thriving in the middle of bushes of short willow. One could even smell nyulou vegetable in the morning. She often stood here, turning round to get a full view of Danba Temple. At its highest point, which happened to be halfway up the mountain, was the Buddha-sunning platform, tall, large, and spotlessly clean. When the wind was blowing, you could hear the streamers at the top of the structure quivering and making a tearing sound. Hundreds of small dwellings had been built on the mountain where terrain permitted. Further ahead was a small river. It originated in the mountains and fed into Nianchu River sparkling in the distance. On the other side of the river was Manrenba.

Every time she walked on this road, she would forget that she was a Living Buddha, the reincarnation of Danzeng Wangdui, or that she was a man. She was thrilled by the smell of the countryside and enjoyed standing on the wooden bridge and watching the water weeds waving this way and that as the water swirled around them. Behind Nianchu River was a stretch of barren hills.

Next day an elaborate baptism would be held for her. Its aim was to rid her of greed, jealousy, and suspicion, and it would be the last baptism to reveal Buddha. It was fall. Believers had been rushing here from the mountains in an endless stream to welcome the ceremonies revealing the Living Buddha, and alms-giving activities that would take place immediately after she was baptized. Zhaxi had no interest in any of these activities. She only wanted to have more time to think in solitude.

As usual, she arrived at the main hall of Teacher Manrenba's place. The hall looked empty. A corpse was placed in the middle. The teacher was going to discuss the position of the pulse point in the human body, just something she was keen to know. The teacher waited for a zhaba to set up a sacrificial altar before cutting. He cut open the chest, took out the vital organs, and put them on the table. Then he singled out the heart and pointed out the position of the hole of the heart. An offensive odor made Zhaxi nauseous. She was the only woman there, although like the rest, she had her hair shaved. Next to her was Gelie Banjue. He and the other dozen pupils looked at the teacher with rapt attention. Gelie Banjue was a gexi sent here for further studies by Balang Monastery and had finished studying "Shilun Jingang." Zhaxi habitually stayed close to him at every lecture.

The teacher asked all his pupils to close their eyes and see what was on his mind using their mental discernment. A moment later, four lamas told him what they saw. The teacher called on Sangsang Zhaxi, the youngest pupil as well as the Living Buddha. Sangsang immediately entered into a contemplative state, but since she had

studied yoga for only 6 years, the holes of intelligence in her heart were still blurred. She recited the True Word to tranquilize her essence and pulse, but she still could not see clearly. At this point her toes suddenly felt feverish and soon a gush of hot air traveled from her feet to the holes in her heart. She quickly recited the three purity true word to stabilize her thought. Gradually she saw a frozen river in the teacher's heart. As she drifted between understanding and enlightenment, she discovered herself standing totally nude in the river. She collected her thoughts and told the teacher, who said to her that that was what he saw. It was not the eye of the heart which saw the future. The teacher began cutting into the scalp from the temple. Sangsang's mind was in a turmoil. The teacher had not explained to her why she was in the river. Was that going to be her future? She was amazed at the way she looked when she was totally naked, like kongxingmu in Buddha paintings. At that point the teacher removed a piece of soft bone from the brain and said, "This is the future eye. With proper training, you will be able to see with this eye all the hidden illnesses in other people and the evil all around. Just now I saw Sangsang Zhaxi in the frozen river, which is one of the six obligations and three bitterness she will choose during her astrological divination a few days from now." Sangsang Zhaxi listened. "But your mastery of yoga will remain intact after your three-day stay in the frozen river." Sangsang Zhaxi was now totally confused. She had seen the river only from a long distance on the mountain. While she did not feel chilly when she stayed in a snowy place for a few days, what would it be like in a frozen river? She also thought of the gush of hot air in her toes earlier and knew that it was not her doing. She looked sideways and saw the halo still moving in Banjue's hair. She gave him a smile. She realized that Banjue had achieved a greater mastery of yoga than the teacher. It was just that he had never told anybody. Holding the piece of soft bone high up, the teacher told everybody that the dead person was one who did not understand human affairs and muddled through life, which was why that piece of bone was yellow. "When you cultivate yourselves to the point of achieving enlightenment, it will be transparent. It is what dhyana, xian, and migong in the Buddhist religion all boil down to. Only this piece of bone can enable you to see Buddhism clearly and make you enlightened and clear-headed enough to identify the spiritual part of everything." The teacher then scraped out an eye and pricked it with a knife. He watched some dark fluid flow out from the eye and said, "The layman depends on this eye to see things. Because this eye is impure in itself, the layman is bogged down by the five poisons and cannot attain purity." Zhaxi fixed her gaze at the mutilated corpse. It belonged to a middle-aged person with large and white teeth. Drones of flies were hovering over the vital organs.

In the afternoon, she sat quietly alone in her room. She had just been to see her mother, who was gravely ill. She tried to treat her illness using the medical knowledge she had learned from Teacher Manrenba in the past few months, but to no avail. Last month she managed to

remove the demon of illness partially to a dog, which died immediately. But Larang Xiongzuo said that all things were spiritual and that illness should not be transferred at will. She felt depressed as she watched her mother wither day by day. The next day she would be baptized in a ceremony that would be the most elaborate in the temple since Living Buddha Danzeng Wangdui passed away. But she was preoccupied with something else. Over the past few days, all of the kangcun had put up new streamers. The trombones in the temple, unused for over 10 years, had been repaired. A few lamas practiced on them everyday. All the halls were full of butter lamps burning day and night. Confused and nervous, she stared blankly at a lamp.

A ceremonial altar had been prepared at the center of the hall, with Buddha statues and all kinds of sacrificial offerings. The five internal organs removed from the dissected corpse were all put on the altar. The intestines, now cleansed, were placed in a golden bowl. Below were several layers of pads. The four incense burners were filled with joss sticks. Red cloth was spread out under the murals lining the walls. Butter lamps were everywhere.

As usual, she would be baptized together with Larang Xiongzuo Danzeng Wangjie. When she thought of being baptized with him, she had difficulty breathing. She felt Wangjie disliked her and was not happy with the fact that his brother was reincarnated in her. But Wangjie was a master of mifa. Moreover, it was he who taught her the Five Books of Major Theory. She thought of his face with its heavily lined forehead. When he looked at a person, his wrinkles twisted and turned. His eyeballs almost took up all the room in his small eyes. He was extraordinarily tall and big.

She also thought of the murals in the temple. The next day she would be doing what was depicted in the murals: lying on top of Buddha and lifting her two legs. She was suddenly disturbed by a naked feeling of moistness and heat. The face of Larang Xiongzuo flashed through her mind. He was not smiling. She immediately banished her thoughts and entered a state of meditation, reciting the Shijia Rulai curse. She saw three kongxingmu approach her to tell her that the next day Jingangxi Buddha would personally baptize her. The one in the red dress even turned around to give her a smile. Later her ideal Buddha also appeared, sitting on the manchaluo opposite her. Her body felt feverish, her pulsa flashing like a beacon in her heart, her buttocks, thighs, kneecaps, ankles, and insteps as light as feathers. At this point Banjue appeared. Realizing she did not have a stitch on, she bashfully and hurriedly withdrew from meditation. In her emotional turmoil, she summoned into her Buddhas from all over. Her brain was droning, even noises from outside entered her mind. She had no alternative but to enter mediation again, and pondered on what the three kongxingmu had said earlier.

The fragrance of frying kasai wafted in from outside. Feeling hungry, she knocked the wooden fish. A maid came in and was told to fetch a butter tea. Then Sangsang

closed the door. It was already late at night. Staring at the black knot on the wick in the lamp, she wondered what she would be like the next day. Her heartbeat quickened the instant she thought of herself lying there totally naked. She felt fearful. In an attempt to dispel this disrespect for all the Buddhas, she tried to meditate, but no matter what she did, she could not relax. She got fidgety. For the first time in all these years, she could not concentrate. She knew she had violated the biqiu violation and tensed up all over. She relighted the two butter lamps that had gone out, while chanting the secret codes of Buddhism. Gradually she became enlightened.

She awoke in the early morning, feeling feminine all over. The day had barely broken and the light was still dim. First, her blood. It was flowing quietly throughout her whole body. Her breasts were pressing against her undershirt. Her thighs, pelvis, and soft abdomen were light and smooth. She sat up, her breasts jiggling slightly. As her nipples brushed against her undershirt, she felt a dizzying pleasure which quickly spread to her genital area. Instinctively she put her hand there, which only intensified the feverish sensation in her. The woman in her slowly woke up. Then the thought struck her that soon she would reveal herself naked to the world. Nervously she clasped her shoulders, her teeth chattering. She watched the sky slowly turn from reddish purple to blue and then brighten.

Hundreds of lamas filled the monastery. All the lights were burning. Various drums, bells, and cymbals were sounded in a chorus. Draped in a kasaya, with a string of red beads around her neck, Sangsang Zhaxi walked up to the middle of the pad and sat down cross-legged, facing Larang Xiongzu. She put her hands on her knees, her palms facing upward, and recited the secret Buddha incantation. She was emotionally very agitated and her hands trembled now and then. Out of shyness, she put her legs close to her thighs. When they sounded the sacred horn again, she noticed she could not calm down at all. In her nervous confusion, her mind seized upon a zhenyan tuoluomi incantation and tried to meditate but she got the words all mixed up. It was too late. She opened her eyes and saw Larang Xiongzu unfasten his kasaya and walk up to her. She gave him an imploring look and apprehensively let him press her down on the pad. Instantly she went into a daze from the swelling and pain between her thighs and the weight of the body on top of her. The woman injected into her body early that morning was torn into pieces by Larang Xiongzu.

The first thing she felt was the perspiration on her back and neck. Her lower part, no longer swollen and painful, was now wriggling naturally in tandem with the body above her. She seemed to be floating down a black hole, a ticklish feeling now and then traveling up from her thighs. She was alone in the hole, which calmed her momentarily. Then she suddenly realized that she was performing the nannu shuangshenfa meditation and that she must rely on her breath and pulse to find the wisdom inside Danzeng Wangjie's body. Only then could both

attain enlightenment. She instantly thought of using her wisdom. By then, however, Wangjie had pulled her up. He twisted one of her legs around his waist. This movement made her forget her pulse. Now she began to feel herself withering slowly. Like a magnet, Larang Xiongzu kept sucking the marrow and essence from her entire body. She collapsed. Involuntarily she let Larang Xiongzu do as he pleased. When Danzeng Wangjie sat down again cross-legged and put her close to him, she crouched down and skillfully hooked her legs behind his back like the kongxingmu in the mural. She saw her breasts, which had budded in the morning, shrivel like those of an old woman. The pain in her lower abdomen and her shortness of breath began to move from her pubic bones to her pelvis and up along the spinal cord and vertebra. She opened her eyes. The entire ceremonial site was bathed in sunlight. Greenish-blue incense smoke was swirling all around her. She could only see the golden smile on the Buddha above the green smoke. She turned away from Wangjie's foul-smelling chin. Among the sea of shining heads, she spotted Banjue. She instantly closed her eyes and, teeth clenched, buried her face in Wangjie's chest.

The baptism ceremony did not end until noon. When she regained consciousness, she discovered she was lying face down on the pad like a dog, her legs bent, her whole body still twitching convulsively, and her breasts limp and wizened, soaked in perspiration. She suddenly thought of her dying mother. Two nuns stepped forward, helped her get up, and offered her some water in a golden bowl to wipe away the sweaty stains on her body. She could not move, her legs having lost sensation. When she stood up, the sacred horns were sounded all around. Buddhist singing merged with the wailing of bili [an instrument]. The golden bowl was also placed on the manchalu at this time as an offering. Larang Xiongzu had put on his kasaya and seated himself on a rush cushion, his face glowing. Her legs shivering, she waited for this solemn ceremony to end. She knew the yoga that she had spent years mastering had departed from her body that morning. But she was no longer amazed that she was a woman and that all her organs could only be those of a woman.

Sangsang Zhaxi died in the evening 2 days after she was put in a frozen river. According to rituals, she should practice nirvana for 3 days in the river and, after 3 days, reveal Rulaizang. Three lamas took turns keeping watch over her and smashed the ice that had hardened around her neck. The huokoujue incantation which she had mastered never returned to her body. Just before daybreak, Xionglaiaba Suolangzimo left the fire and walked forward, stepping over the ice gingerly. He saw Sangsang's body sink gradually into the river. They pulled it to the surface and saw that she had turned as transparent as ice. Not a drop of blood could be found where her breasts and knees had been bitten to pieces by fish. Her eyes opened slightly, the same old look that she had when she meditated in the past.

The procession welcoming the Living Buddha arrived at dawn. People were dressed in their Sunday best and the horses were bedecked with colored silks. As far as monks were concerned, whether the Living Buddha was dead or alive made no difference. Still they surrounded Sangsang briefly, stupefied. She lay frozen in the ice, the sun shining on her, neither hot nor cold. All organs inside her body, transparent as ice, were visible. A fish was swimming to and fro in her intestines. Nobody knew where it came from.

Sangsang's skull is now with me here. The seller at the time told me it was passed down from his great-grandfather who had studied witchcraft at Manrenba's place when he was young. Zhaxi's skull was Danba Temple's sacred instrument and had always been placed in a sacred hall to be used only during the baptism ceremony. The skull has now turned yellowish brown; a crack had

appeared at the left side at some unknown point in the past. Grease and dirt had accumulated inside the crack. The center of the skull zigzags like an electrocardiogram. According to a friend in medicine, this is the sign of a woman who has not fully matured. The side of the skull is inlaid with brass patterns. Inside was also a layer of metal set according to the shape of the skull. The asking price then was 500 yuan. I bought it for a cheap 100 yuan. Whoever has U.S. dollars to burn should contact me. He must pay me enough to finance my trip to the northeast.

Ma Jian, born 1953. Male. Unemployed. Formerly member of China Photographers Association.

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END

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